

(April 3, 2009) SW News Herald: Lipinski and Legislators Review Underpass Plans

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Several legislators spent two hours last Friday at Toyota Park in Bridgeview speaking to the U.S. House Transportation Committee chair, Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd), about the importance of a Central Avenue underpass.

One of those legislators, Cong. James Oberstar (D-Minn.), spoke of the possibility of finally moving forward with this project.

In addition to Lipinski, who hosted the event, among others at the hearing were Gary Hannig, Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) secretary, and mayors from many southwest suburban communities.

There was frustration in many of the speakers' voices because this project has been talked about for about 30 years.

Illinois State Sen. Louis Viverito (D- 11th) joked about the long wait. "I would like it (the underpass) to be there before I go to Holy Sepulchre (Cemetery)," he said.

With rail traffic expected to grow and about 1,000 trucks leaving local rail yards daily, many spoke about how the underpass is needed to ease traffic congestion. And the underpass was not the only item mentioned at the hearing.

Others noted there are no continuous sidewalks or bike paths in the area, and that there is no safe way for pedestrians to walk on the Cicero Avenue and Harlem Avenue bridges.

As for the underpass, it would be 2.2 miles underground and cost between \$300 million and \$600 million. It would run from 65th to 72nd streets on Central Avenue.

The process of getting such an underpass built would be in three phases.

Phase One, which they are in now, will be completed by 2010. Phase Two and Three would be the construction phases, and they would each take a few years to complete, but Lipinski did not give an exact timetable.

Viverito told Oberstar about the importance of getting police, fire and emergency vehicles to travel quickly through the area, which they often cannot do now because of delays at railroad crossings.

Oberstar noted that some of the trains are 2.5 miles long. "They sit and do not worry about the health consequences (of long delays)," said Oberstar.

Chicago Ald. Lona Lane (18th) noted that the 18th Ward also has a terrible time because it is surrounded by trains.

Lane also asked about the possibility of having a viaduct on 87th and Pulaski and having that strip of the street resurfaced.

"We write to them, we call them and they don't respond," said Lane.

At times, she added, train delays in her area have been up to an hour.

Oberstar urged legislators to hold hearings to highlight what such a project would do in creating jobs. Such hearings, he said, could help in obtaining federal dollars.